CARVING MOTIFS IN TIMBER HOUSES OF KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU

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ABSTRACT

Prominent timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu are adorned with decorative carved components depicted in motifs of flora, geometry and Arabic calligraphy. Consistency in patterns of motif, particularly flora, results to establishment of identity to the vernacular architecture of north-eastern region of Peninsular Malaysia. This paper presents an analytical study of the visual forms of motifs of carved components in the houses of Kelantan and Terengganu which denotes its significant attributes and uses. Carvings of nine houses in Kelantan and four houses in Terengganu were analyzed by interpreting 13 sets of carving measured drawings of the houses. The drawings were obtained from Centre for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World (KALAM) at the Department of Architecture in the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Interpretation of motifs is based on meanings described in the texts accompanied the drawings and literatures of Malay woodcarving, and triangulated with narrations from the two woodcarvers. The analysis of the documents revealed that several types of carved components with distinctive motifs in two and three dimensional compositions were placed in certain orders within the fabrics of the houses. Wall, door and window ventilation panels, railings, gate panel and stringers are types of components characterized by the shape of perforation and incision with relief or non-relief carvings. These components were crafted in relation to the house form and architectural elements such as wall, door, window, stair and gate. The significant aspect of the placement of the carvings in the houses is that it enhances beautiful ambiance and signifies regional identity to the vernacular architecture of these two states.

1. INTRODUCTION

Woodcarving is considered as an integral component to the vernacular Malay houses of Kelantan and Terengganu, the north-eastern states of Peninsular Malaysia. It is ornamentation to the timber architecture of the region. Motifs of flora, geometry, Arabic calligraphy and cosmic features are depicted on panels of doors, walls, railings and ventilation components in different shapes and sizes (Ismail, 2001). Common motif, especially flora, contributes to the identity of north-eastern region which originated from the architecture of Langkasuka Empire dated as early as 14th century (Farish and Eddin, 2003). However, differences arise in intricacy and complexity of the motifs and its stylization. The intricacy and complexity of carving suggest a certain degree of skillfulness and creativity of the traditional craftsmen in the fabrication of the carved components (Muhammad Afandi, 1995). The proficiency of shaping woodcraft with the skilful use of the media offers the craftsman a means of artistic expression (Jackson and Day, 2005). Most of the carved components found in the houses depict floral design with perforated and relief carving.

This paper presents a preliminary finding of a descriptive study of the carving motifs shaped on various forms of carved components found in the traditional timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu. The major research question is what are the types of motif depiction that shaped the composition in woodcarving in Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses.

2. METHODS

2.1 Analytical Review on Measured Drawings

The analytical review was conducted on thirteen prominent Malay timber houses. Nine houses were located in Kelantan and the other four houses were located in Terengganu. Table 1.0 shows the information of the houses including the types of architectural forms and year of construction, owners and locations of the houses. Several factors determine the selection of the houses which include: (1) the houses represent the type of dwelling architecture that originated

from the east coast region of Peninsular Malaysia, (2) the houses were decorated with excellent carvings which are regional and distinctive in character, (3) the houses provide a comprehensive collection of carved components which are relevant for visual analysis purpose.

Table 1.0: Timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu

No	Type of House	Year Built	Owner	Location of House
1	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1920 's	Encik Hassan B. Mohd Amin	Jalan Pengkalan Chepa, Kota Bharu, Kelantan
2	Rumah Bujang Berserambi Dua Beradik	1850 's	Tuan Hj. Mohamad Dobah (Tuan Hj. Mohamad Abdullah)	1408, Jln. Post Office Lama, Kota Bharu
3	Rumah Bujang	1800 's	Wan Aisyah	Jalan Sultanah Zanab, Kota Bharu
4	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1920 's	Hj. Wan Ahmad Hj. Abdullah	Jalan Post Office Lama, Kota Bharu, Kelantan
5	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1930 's	Hj. Yaakub Mohammad	2623, Kampung Sireh, Kota Bharu
6	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1937	Wan Hussain Bin Wan Abdul Rahman	4962, Kampung Sireh, Kota Bharu
7	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1933	Hassan Bin Yusof	4963 Lorong Tukang Perak, Kampung Sireh, Kota Bharu
8	Twelve-pillarded house/ Long-roofed house	1800 's	Tok Yakub	Kampung Belongan, Bachok, Kelantan
9	Rumah bujang berserambi dua beradik	1920 's	Haji Wan Sulong	Jalan Sultanah Zanab, Kota Bharu, Kelantan
10	Rumah Bujang Berkembar Dua Beradik	188?	Hjh Mariam Hj. Mat	168, Kampung Hiliran Masjid, Kuala Terengganu
11	Rumah bujang berselasar	1850 's	Hj. Awang	Kampung Losong Haji, Su, Kuala Terengganu
12	Rumah bumbung limas	1914	Dato' Biji Sura (Nik Mohamad bin Hitam)	Duyong Kecil, Kuala Terengganu
13	Rumah bujang berserambi dua beradik	1800 's	Tok Ku Paloh	D62, Paloh Makam Tok Ku, Cabang Tiga, KT, Terengganu

A set of measured drawings which consists of plans and elevations of the 13 houses including crossed sectional and detail drawings was referred for detail descriptive analysis to identify the types of carved components and determine its motifs and ordering principles of composition. These measured drawings and the reports were produced and documented by the students of architectural program from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Edition and reproduction of a few documented drawings were made to improve its visual quality and accuracy for the purpose of analysis and data display. The objects which provide raw materials for visual investigation must

be also viewed, understood, or placed in some analytical framework before they can be regarded as data (Emisson and Smith, 2000).

2.2 Interview with Woodcarvers

Personal interviews were conducted with the two prominent woodcarvers to obtain their verification on the carving motifs and reasons of selecting the motifs. The first woodcarver interviewed was Norhaiza Nordin from Kampung Raja in Terengganu and the second one was Muhaimin Hasbullah from Temerloh in Pahang. Each interview was carried out in approximately two-hour period with the adoption of standardized open-ended interview questions. Narrative information from the woodcarvers were triangulated with the measured drawing data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed that a collection of 13 types of architectural components were fitted with carving: ventilation panels of window, door and wall, railings of verandah and staircase, wall panel, leaves of door and gate, stringer, gate, roof eave, bracket and gable end. The visual forms of the carved components were fabricated with specific carving motifs, types of incision, shapes, sizes and layouts. The distinctive forms of the various carved components are apparent with respect to its placement and layout in the interior as well as exterior fabrics of the timber houses. The components were carved either: (1) in relief or non-relief, (2) perforated or non-perforated, and (3) overlapped or non-overlapped forms.

Plant elements including flowers, flower buds, leaves, tendrils, fruit, and shoot were the most popular design pattern employed in the carving. They were combined to form one complete carving with a certain degree of complexity and intricacy. For example, as appeared in the carved ventilation panel on wall found in Mohamad Dobah's house (Figure 1). This relief, perforated panel is equipped with floral elements including a central flower that serves as an origin. The central flower is surrounded by the complementary motifs of other plant elements like branches, leaves, stems and tendrils in intertwining and meandering characters. In short, the depictions of plant elements are in specific characteristics with distinctive features. This motif represents the unending growth and movement of life in natural plant (Rosnawati, 2005; Norhaiza, 2008). Additionally, floral motif was acceptable in the Malay art because Islam permits the use of non-figurative elements in the artistic work (Othman, 1995). Perhaps it is rational for craftsmen to depict the motifs of living plants in its natural state for the sake of following certain order and movement in plant life instead of being oblivious to it. This is suggestive indication of their cognizance state of mind to the life in nature.

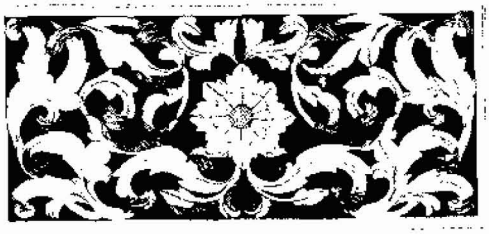


Figure 1: Ventilation panel fitted on wall of rumah ibu (main hall) at Mohamad Dobah's house with intricate floral design

It appears that carved ventilation panels in single rectangular layout were the commonly found in three-dimensional format that contribute to high visual intricacy and complexity. For example, the horizontal rectangular panel found at external wall of Wan Sulong house as illustrated in Figure 2 has carving in quadruple overlaps character represents the intertwining of the plant motif with complex arrangement of elements gives almost a three-dimensional look. The design qualities in the panel including depiction and composition of floral motifs in high relief and carved with perforation were contributory to probably the highest degree of visual intricacy and complexity. Several layers of elements of floral motifs such as flowers, branches, stems and leaves were intertwined by having their curvy lines to cross over or under each other in delicate movement. This delicate and complex arrangement of floral elements in three-dimensional effect and with detail characteristics is certainly the most difficult carving technique applied on this panel. Certainly, it requires high level of carving skill and ingenuity in fabricating this type of panel.

Figure 2: Carved ventilation panel with the highest complexity in carving form found at external wall of Wan Sulong house

Flora motifs were manifested through the choice of several types of plants such as *ketumbit, ketam*

guri, bayam peraksi (all are weeds grown in house yards) and *kekacang* (climbing legume) as decorative elements utilised in the carved components. Perhaps the plant motif such as *ketam guri* was favored by the woodcarvers due to its flowers in vivid and striking color. Full-bloomed flowers especially those in bright colors are eye-catching living things which have become central object in the carving composition. Spiraling tendrils are also represented as the predominant theme in a few samples of carved components found in the houses as apparent in the ventilation panel.

Spirals are depicted as dominant features in ventilation panels of window and door and on walls with non-relief motifs. The depiction of similar type of motif with slight different in composition signifies the craftsmen ingenuity and creativity in the fabrication of the carved components (Figures 3, 4 and 5). The central elements of the carvings probably the plant branches are depicted differently for each panel. The fabrication of the carvings with three different characters of central elements was perhaps a defining feature that characterized the form of each panel. Beauty is portrayed in these panels by its elegant and gentle movement of the spiral elements. All panels exhibit inward organic movements of the spirals which spread from the central branches within the rectangular borders. The panels with this type of floral composition serves as one of carving archetypes originated from this region and imitated by several craftsmen with individual artistic approach. Another possible reason is that these panels were produced by the same master craftsman who was originated from Terengganu and was hired by the house owners to fabricate the components with distinctive features (Abdul Halim and Wan Hashim, 1996). It appears that this type of non-relief floral motif was mostly prevalent on ventilation panels found above windows and doors as seen in the houses which were all located in Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu.

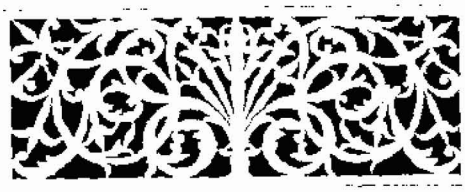


Figure 3: Carved panel with creeping plant motif fitted above door of rumah ibu at Mariam house

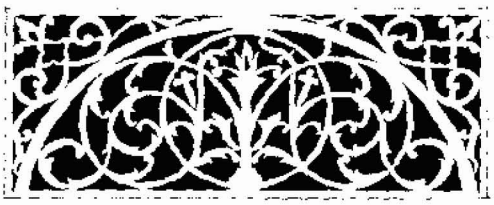
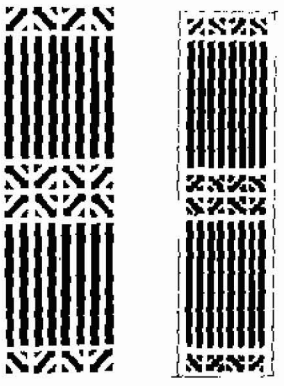


Figure 4: Carved panel with creeping plant motif fitted above door of rumah ibu at Biji Sura house

Figure 5: Another carved panel with creeping plant motif fitted above door of rumah ibu at Wan Embong house

Fabrication of carved components for house setting was not limited to the application of carving motif from floral elements alone. It also includes other types of motifs such as geometry and calligraphy which were normally produced in non-relief and non-overlapped forms. Flora, geometry and Islamic calligraphy are the three major types of motifs used by Malay woodcarvers Zulkifli (2000). It is apparent that the woodcarvers from the states of Kelantan and Terengganu also preferred non-figurative motif like geometry as apparent in the wall ventilation panels found at Awang and Mariam houses (Figures 6a and 6b, respectively). These two perforated panels exhibit distinctive carving features which are similar in character. Motifs of vertical stripes dominate both panels. The series of vertical lines were stretched longthwise across the horizontal bands forming rhythmic composition of strip and band pattern. The two-dimensional composition of non-relief motifs enhances the vertical rectangular layout of the two panels. The visual form of these panels which are similar in character and slightly different in compositional elements also signifies the craftsmen ingenuity and creativity in the fabrication of the carved components for the specific locations and purpose.



(a) (b)

Figure 6: Carved component with geometrical motif in strip (band) pattern situated at Awang house (a) and Mariam house (b)

Motif of Islamic calligraphy possesses aesthetic values and it is normally used in carved components to convey Islamic messages. Calligraphic elements depict the form of Arabic characters, verses from the Quran and local Arabic writing called *Jawi* (Abdul Halim Nasir, 1987). This motif was widely used in mosques and houses ornamentation particularly in Kelantan and Terengganu. A few prominent houses like Biji Sura house, also known as Kota Duyong, was adorned with various forms of Islamic calligraphy depicted on several carved panels. For example, the carved ventilation panel fitted above the doors of main hall and bedroom as illustrated in Figure 7 represents primarily Quranic verses enclosed by the embedded semi-circular structural frame. The symmetrical repetition of the same calligraphy motif and pattern on both sides of the panel creates a sense of balance and consistency in composition. Apparently, the unique character of the carved component is in the intertwining movement of the calligraphic elements that embrace the non-relief surface of the rectangular panel. In many cases, calligraphic elements were usually found in isolation or in complementary with the other two major kinds of motifs.

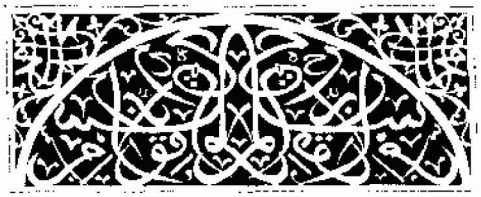


Figure7: Carved panel with a motif of calligraphy found above doors of rumah ibu and bedroom at Biji Sura house

The study found that figurative elements either in abstract or real-life image was never applied as caving motif on any type of carved component from the timber houses. This suggests that motifs of flora, geometry and Islamic calligraphy were the three principal types of compositional elements used by Malay craftsmen from the states of Kelantan and Terengganu.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, motifs in carving of Kelantan and Terengganu houses displayed distinctive visual composition. The carvings for house components were not objects crafted in a simple way but inextricably bound up with designated function, artistic qualities and skillfulness possessed by the traditional craftsmen. The relationship between the compositional motifs, function and the layout of the carvings affects the overall visual form of the carved components. Its visual forms was crafted and subscribed by the woodcarvers to be seen or used primarily in domestic setting thus creating pleasant ambiance.

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